

All the Pieces

by WriterJC

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Summary: This is Someone to Watch over Me. Part 2 and in between. Not necessary to read Someone. . . first, though.

All the Pieces

> <meta name="Generator"> ALL THE PIECES

Notes: This story is a sequel of sorts to: Someone to Watch Over Me. It is a continuation of that story, and in some ways even overlaps that story. I'm not backtracking, promise, and you don't have to read that story to understand this one, because the next paragraph is a handy dandy summary of that story AKA, all you need to know going in. So, if you *want* to read "Someone. . ." first...then skip the next paragraph. Otherwise, read on. Someone to Watch Over Me can be found at the GTA site (<http://www.pcez.com/~inkling/>), (Fanfiction.net) or my site (<http://www.geocities.com/jackeescorner>).

"Someone to Watch Over Me" - summary - Gary saves a young woman named Sarah from some very unsavory types. Turns out, she witnessed the execution of a federal agent by agents gone bad. The agent who was killed was her husband of only a week. She'd been on the run ever since...till she met Gary, that is. In an effort to save her, they end up in an abandoned farm waaaay outside Chicago, which is where the showdown takes place. At the end, the good guy agents show up. Two days later, having grown closer to Gary, Sarah returns home.

Notes2: ~~~preceeding text indicates Italics.

ALL THE PIECES

by Jackee C.

~~~\_ "Don't move!" Sarah warned, grasping the gun between shaking hands. "I'm not afraid to use this!" \_

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Jeremy Rivers nodded, coughing and gasping for breath. Both his hands raised over his head, ceding that she was the one with the power.

Satisfied that he wouldn't be moving, Sarah looked beyond him to Gary. After the goons had hit him, she'd seen Gary double over and fall to the ground. His minute motions assured her that he was at least still breathing. The relief that flooded through her was stifled by a movement in her peripheral vision. Jeremy Rivers, no longer coughing had risen to his feet, ready to lunge.

Panic welled in an instantaneous rush and she had to check the instinct to simply drop the gun and run. Instead she grasped the gun more firmly, nearly pulling the trigger in her panic. But River's got the message nonetheless and froze.

"S-sarah!" she heard Gary calling her. His shuffling motions suggested that he was trying to make it to her side, she was afraid to spare him more than a minute glance. Not entirely a good idea; he looked about ready to pass out.

"Sarah, don't do it. It's a mistake." He continued to struggle toward her.

Jeremy Rivers turned at Gary's voice. "I know you," he spoke. "You called me this morning...warned me."

"What?" Ice settled in the pit of Sarah's stomach. Gary looked positively guilty. "I thought you were helping me," she whispered. "Instead, you're with them." Fury and hurt overtook the frozen sensation and suddenly the gun was pointed toward Gary.

Gary's hands shot skyward. "Sarah. Sarah, no." His voice had dropped lower. "That wasn't it. You have to trust me. You trusted me through the past few days, didn't you? Why-why would I try to betray you after all of that, huh? I wouldn't do that, Sarah."

Sarah looked into his eyes and saw the earnestness that had so attracted her before. "I don't know," she said, shaking her head to clear it. "I don't know what to believe any more. I did trust you, Gary. But...he's the one." She pointed the gun again at Jeremy Rivers.

Gary's arms lowered and he took a step closer. "Listen, Sarah. Remember what we talked about? Remember that you wanted to start over, and make things right? I think this is the way to do it. I think maybe here is where we can start. What would Frank want?"

"But, he's trying to kill me," she cried, her hands shaking. "You, too." Gary moved hesitantly toward her. He looked so worried as if \*he\* didn't trust her.

"I don't know about that," Gary said. "It was that guy who was in the car that shot at you." He pointed to one of the gunmen lying on the floor. "And it was their car that nearly ran you over," he continued gently, edging still closer. "I think maybe this man is trying to help us."

Sarah looked the man over, uncertain. "I trust you, Gary," she said. "But what if you're wrong?"

"I'm not," Gary said with conviction. If he was sure, she would believe too. And she was so tired. Too tired to hold onto the gun anymore. Suddenly the gun clattered to the floor and her knees seemed to forget to hold her. Gary was immediately at her side and they both settled to the straw covered planks.

Almost disinterestedly she watched as Rivers gathered his gun and then moved off to check the other fallen gunmen. All she knew was that a hazy warmth was settling around her, a warmth where she didn't have to think. When a picture was slipped into her hands, she looked up surprised to see Rivers stooped in front of them.

It was a picture of she and Frank, on their honeymoon. And there was a message to Jeremy Rivers on the back of it, asking that Jeremy watch over her.

"Frank was my partner before he married you," Rivers explained. "Unfortunately, when he needed me, I'd gone under deep cover. I didn't get this message until too late. His last assignment had been to recover a list of names. That way the Agency would let him go easy; set him up with a nice 'normal' job. He agreed. It didn't go as planned, and..." Rivers sighed.

"I've been looking for you ever since. The necklace he gave you contains a list of names. Once we have it, and we capture those men, you'll be safe. No one will come after you anymore."

Sarah ran a trembling hand over the handwriting and looked up at Rivers. Tears streamed down her face, but she smiled.

"For what its worth, he loved you very much and would never have knowingly put your life in danger. But he must have known that things were off track. I'm so sorry, Sarah." ~~~

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Part One

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voice-over: A wise man once said that a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. Sometimes in life, we are so busy taking steps, hurrying to get further along in our thousand miles that we become distracted and lose our way and forget to just look around, take in the scenery. The scenery adds color, becoming all the bits and pieces that make life worth living. But no journey is a straight line, there are always crossroads and paths best not taken. Everyday can be a crossroad for a guy who gets tomorrow's news today.

A soft ding heralded the opening of the heavy elevator door. Sarah Reynolds startled slightly at the noise, but all the same she welcomed the chance to leave the stifling quarters of the elevator, even though her new destination was an underground parking lot that aside from being dark, was ripe with a bouquet of unpleasant aromas.

A small gesture by the man at her right urged her in the correct direction. She glanced briefly toward his face. Jeremy Rivers was watching her with sympathetic eyes, and she was sure that he was trying to silently communicate something else to her, but she was too mentally, emotionally and physically drained to make an attempt at figuring out what it was. It was enough to know that this man that she had once thought was her enemy was no longer.

On her other side walked Gary Hobson, the man to whom she owed her life several times over. He had taken a beating for her. Hell, he'd even been shot because of her. She glanced up at him from the corner of her eye, not missing the tired, drawn lines that spoke of just how much he had been through. He turned at her look and offered a reassuring half-smile.

Sarah returned it somewhat tremulously and reached for his hand. His eyes, dark in the dimness of the garage, asked silently if she were okay. Tenderness flooded her. Gary Hobson was a decent man. She knew next to nothing about him, and yet she knew everything.

She knew that he had stuck by her side through some of the worst experiences in her life. Even during the ride to the Agency office in Springfield, she had felt his reassuring presence. Upon arrival, when Rivers had wanted him to see the medic, he'd argued and fought his way back to her side wanting to be with her during her questioning.

Sarah remembered vividly the way he'd boldly walked up to her side, his expression and manner told the agents looking on that he was there for the duration and that he wasn't going to let anything happen to her.

They had been led to a door marked 'Interview Room #7' where a sallow faced man flanked by two equally solemn humans dressed in dark suits were waiting. The situation had taken on a surreal nature as the five of them had filed into the room and the door swung shut behind him.

The sallow faced man had done all of the talking, beginning with simple questions directed toward Gary; what he did, where he lived, worked--the type of a questions one might ask at a dinner party. She'd almost begun to relax a little when they opened the folders.

Several photos were passed around the table. Gary, first, and then she was asked whether either of them had seen or could identify any of the individuals. They both easily identified the two men who'd attacked Gary in the barn, and had tried to shoot Sarah.

The next set of photos had been of men that Gary couldn't identify, but one of them had been blazingly familiar to Sarah. He'd been one of the men at the scene when Frank was killed. He hadn't pulled the trigger, but he had been present. The agents shared a knowing look at that piece of information, but said nothing, only passing along another photograph--the one that set the tone for the next hour. The fact that Gary paled when he saw the picture alarmed her. But when he'd jumped from his chair and flatly refused to pass the picture on to her, a deep dread had settled in the pit of her stomach.

The sallow faced leader--they never had learned the men's names--had

threatened to have him removed from the room if he didn't comply. His words were soft, calm, as if it mattered little either way which he choose to do. The other two agents barely recognized Gary's threatening stance, aside from glancing up minutely and then jotting notes in the folders. Gary had been left to simply stare at the agents in growing confusion.

Sarah herself had been the one to stand and take the picture from his limp fingers. What she'd seen had caused her to sink heavily into her seat. Had she eaten lunch, she would have promptly lost it. Yes, she knew this bloodied shell of a man. She'd been married to him, for precisely one week, six months earlier.

The rest of the interview had ranged from dark and threatening; almost accusing, to gently inquisitive and helpful. Sarah wasn't sure whether she was coming or going. And then, suddenly, the three men had stood up and left the room, leaving she and Gary to simply stare at one another. Moments later, Rivers had appeared and assured them that everything was all right, that the worse was over. The Agency would provide them lodging for the night, and then return them to Chicago the next day.

Sarah blinked, brought back to the present by a word from Rivers. His alert gaze was scanning the parking area, alert to any dangers. After six months on the run, Sarah couldn't misunderstand that look. But the run was over, finally, finally, over.

Rivers was speaking as they approached a plain white van. "These agents will take you to the safe location," he said as the doors slid opened. "Don't worry about your family and friends, they are being contacted. They know that you are safe. If things go as planned, you'll both be going home very soon."

He nodded the two drivers to the front of the van before he continued, speaking to Sarah directly. "I'm sorry about what had to happen up there. It's policy. Frank was a friend, and I would have spared you if I could."

Sarah felt herself nodding, but found herself too choked to speak. Gary mumbled a thanks and then ushered her into the van where she settled heavily into the seat. Vaguely, she noticed that Rivers held Gary back and thanked him for taking care of her. Gary responded, but Sarah found she simply couldn't focus on it. She no longer had the strength to do anything beyond settling her head along the back of the seat and closing eyes that were dangerously close to spilling over.

"Sure you're okay?" Gary asked, as he settled in the van beside her.

"Fine," she managed to whisper, though not quite proving successful with the tears. They leaked beneath her closed lids and spilled into her ears. She sensed Gary's sudden stillness, and wanted to get control of herself. But her emotions were on the downswing of a rollercoaster ride that she was powerless to stop. All she could was to try to hold on. Next thing she knew, she was wrapped gently in Gary's arms, crying as if her entire world had tumbled in on itself.

Long minutes later, when she felt more in control, she pushed

slightly away from him. "This is familiar," she joked, ducking her head slightly as she wiped at the streaking tears with the backs of her hands. "Sorry about your shirt."

Gary chuckled softly with her. "It's okay, you've had a lot to deal with. You needed to let it out."

"Let it out, huh?" she asked as she contemplated him. "I think I've let out a little more than you bargained for."

"I wouldn't argue with you there," Gary said. "But, I think we're making a couple federal agents very uncomfortable." He nodded his head toward the front windshield of the van. It was then that Sarah realized that the van was no longer moving. The driver and his companion were standing discreetly outside.

Sarah buried her face in Gary's chest in embarrassment. "Great. I'm going to go down in history on some agency report as the woman who held up the federal government by bawling her eyes out."

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## Part Two

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Gary moved quickly across the suite that the agency had assigned to he and Sarah for the night. He came to a stop at patio doors that led out unto a balcony. Or at least they would have had the sliding patio door not been welded shut. He supposed he should have expected that in what was essentially an agency safe house. If the cat had any thoughts of getting the paper to him here, it wouldn't be from the balcony.

He paced back over to the door and cracked it open a bit, glancing in both directions along the corridor. It was empty, save for a plump sweet-faced older woman sitting on a small decorative bench and, of course, the cameras that covered every angle. He waved politely at the woman that they'd dubbed 'Agent Edna' and ducked back into the room. Okay, that entrance might prove difficult.

He moved to the door of one of the bedrooms and contemplated the possibilities. Perhaps he should find a way back to Chicago that night. Nothing else had appeared in the paper since the morning, but that didn't mean the next day wouldn't be back to business as usual. Besides, Sarah had seemed to be calmer since they'd arrived in the room. The sound of the shower's water being shut off caused his search to falter. He'd have to make a decision quickly.

Could he call on Chuck the next day if necessary? Probably. But considering his car was at the Chicago area Agency impound, Chuck wasn't going to be a happy camper. Although, Agent Rivers had promised that Chuck could pick it up first thing in the morning... Unfortunately, there was no phone in the room. It was a little late to wish he'd brought Chuck's cell-phone

Suddenly the bathroom door opened, and Sarah stepped out into the common room wearing a fluffy white robe, her damp hair tumbling about her shoulders. The clothes she'd been wearing were in the small combination washer/dryer to the side of a small kitchenette.

Her eyes settled on him and she smiled. "I was afraid you'd be gone," she said, an unmistakable edge of relief colored her tone. "Or were you just waiting around for a shower? I did manage to save you \*some\* hot water."

Gary simply stared at her, feeling a little guilty about his earlier thoughts of leaving. It wasn't that he wanted to, but he had responsibilities, ones that just wouldn't wait. But then, wasn't Sarah somehow his responsibility, too? The least he could do was see her through until the very end.

"Uh...yeah," he managed to stutter. "Thanks. A...a shower would feel good." And it would also give him time to make up his mind.

"It's all yours," Sarah prodded with a mischievous smile, and slight nod toward the bathroom. She seemed to be having quite the laugh over his discomfort. Gary decided to ignore it. He'd brought it on himself anyway by standing there like a log when any other sane person would have taken the hint and gone on into the bathroom.

He shut the door behind him slightly more firmly than was necessary.

When Gary came out of the bathroom dressed in the other robe that had been hanging in the bathroom, Sarah felt the urge to whistle at him. His wet hair glistened in the kitchenette's artificial lighting and he smelled of shampoo and soap. But he looked so uncomfortable, she decided against it; instead answering the question that she knew was uppermost in his mind.

"They're in the washer. I figured they needed a good wash. Hope you didn't mind my coming in and getting them."

That seemed to take some of the wind out of him, but he still looked as if he wanted to grouse about something. Sarah directed his attention toward the two metal-covered plates sitting on the counter and waggled her eyebrows at him. "Mmmmm?"

It did the trick; his lips turned up in a grudging smile. Perhaps it was food that cured the grouchy beast.

"That smells good," Gary said, lifting one of the metal lids and snagging a french fry. "But you didn't have to cook."

Sarah laughed out loud. "I didn't. Agent Edna brought it. I thought we'd eat in the livingroom?" she suggested. "It's really too small in here, unless you want to stand. Personally, I don't think my feet can take it."

"Mine either," Gary chuckled, managing to snatch another fry before she picked up both plates. Grabbing the drinks, he followed her to the sofa and settled them on the coffee table. Sarah got to the remote first and turned on Jeopardy. 'Dead Presidents for \$200 Alex' the contestant was saying as they tore into their meals with a vengeance. By the first commercial break, both their plates were empty.

"Not bad," Sarah said, "but not nearly enough."

"Agreed."

With a mischievous laugh, Sarah hopped up from the sofa and dragged Gary into the kitchenette. It took little encouragement before she had him involved in a full-fledged foraging mission for munchies. They found, to their surprise, that the federal government had excellent taste in snack foods.

An hour and a half, a game show and two sitcoms later, they were both settled contentedly back against the sofa, their feet propped side by side on the coffee table. Gary moved his feet to one side and pointedly perused the remains of their 'feast', then rolled his head in her direction. "Guess you were hungry," he said teasingly.

"Me?" Sarah laughingly rolled her head to meet his gaze. "Oh, I think I had help, Mister. Besides, surviving the Inquisition really works up the appetite. Not to mention bad guys too numerous to name, hiding out in barns, being rescued..." She paused, her tone growing more serious. "Did I tell you how much it meant for you to be there with me today?"

Gary shrugged, turned away. "It's...okay. I wanted to be there."

"You gave me strength, Gary," Sarah continued. She sat up and turned earnestly toward him. "If it weren't for you, I don't even know if I'd be alive."

"I...just...it was just the right place at the right time." Gary mumbled softly, still not meeting her gaze.

"Gary," Sarah called his name. Reaching out, she touched the side of his face, drawing his eyes around to meet hers. "Thank you," she whispered. Their gazes lingered and held, and then it was she who was kissing him. He responded, quite nicely, in kind. When they separated, Gary moved hesitantly away.

"Uh...I'm... kinda tired."

Sarah frowned slightly in confusion. They'd just spent nearly two hours laughing and teasing, and then he'd just knocked her socks off with a brain-tingling kiss, and now he was getting skittish? "You know, a comment like that could be easily misinterpreted." She said the first thing that popped into her mind.

Gary stared at her a full second before realization began to dawn, and then his expression turned mildly pained.

Sarah hurried to correct herself. "Listen, Gary. I'm sorry... I didn't mean to push... I just thought you were enjoying being with me, and now you're rushing off like I have the plague or something. If I overstepped..."

"No, no," Gary insisted, hurriedly. Then adding more softly, "I enjoyed...you...kissing me. But, I don't think its such a good idea if we...I, uh mean...we probably...." Sarah could see the redness stealing across his features even in the limited light from the television.

"I understand," she said, smiling. "I'll see you in the morning."

He'd overslept. He knew it from the moment he creaked one eye open and peered around the unfamiliar room. Within several moments, the previous day's events caught up to him, and he swung out of the bed, his eyes quickly scanning the room.

Nothing on the bedside table, except an alarm clock marking the hour as 8:13. He threw it an irritated glance; the thing was supposed to have gone off at 6:30. He got up, walked around the bed, threw back the covers and looked underneath. Nothing. During the night someone had folded his clothing and placed them on a chair.

He quickly pulled them on and made ready to leave the room. A slight sound brought his attention back to the nightstand. Crossing the room, he reached for the clock, a suspicion growing in his mind. As his hand touched the volume knob, he was surprised when sound came through. Great job, Hobson, he chided himself. Next time he should probably check the volume. But for the moment, he had bigger problems. He had to find that paper!

Opening the door quietly, he poked his head outside.

"Morning sleepyhead!" Sarah called cheerfully, startling him half out of his wits. He bumped the back of his head against the doorframe.

"Morning," he managed, rubbing at the sore spot. There was no more point to trying to sneak out and find the paper; Sarah was already awake. And had been for a while from the looks of things. She'd straightened up the small suite, and looked to be in the process of making coffee.

"Want some?" she asked over her shoulder, gesturing toward the brewer.

"Uh, yeah. Thanks," Gary answered her, distractedly, taking the long way around the sofa so that he could glance out toward the balcony. Damn, it wasn't there. Where would the cat put the thing? He walked around near the door, surreptitiously glancing around a luggage rack.

"Looking for something?" Sarah's voice sounded directly behind him, causing him to start once again.

He spun to face her. "Huh?"

"Jumpy aren't we?" Sarah smiled, extending a plate containing breakfast. "Danish?"

"Thanks," Gary took the plate, eyeing her curiously.

"Agent Edna," Sarah explained. "So, whatcha looking for?"

"Uh, nothing," Gary fought to look neutral.

Sarah looked at him thoughtfully for several moments, then turned suddenly back toward the kitchen. "I almost forgot. This was inside the door." She returned with a neatly folder newspaper. "I know how you like to stay informed. Although, I am a little surprised that

they only sent the Sun-Times."

Gary managed not to snatch it from her fingers. Instead he murmured polite thanks and moved with studied nonchalance toward the sofa. Sarah continued to talk as he scanned the front page, and finding nothing, turned to the next and then the next. He made the occasional grunt every so often, hoping it would suffice as paying attention.

On the fourth page a headline jumped out at him:

#### WOMAN FATALLY INJURED IN FIRE AT UPHOLSTERY SHOP

All grunting stopped as he began to read. The incident was to occur at 3:09 that afternoon while many of the employees were taking the afternoon break. The woman was said to have fallen asleep. Authorities hadn't discovered how the fire had started.

The way Gary saw it, he had just over six hours to get back to Chicago. And his options weren't many. He hurriedly folded the paper and stuffed it into his back pocket, and prepared to make his excuses to Sarah. She was still talking. And suddenly had his undivided attention.

".....catch the cat?" She finished and looked at him expectantly.

"What did you say?" he asked her.

"Were you even listening?" she demanded.

"Well....yeah....of course I was... you were talking about a cat." Gary hoped he was close. He offered his best innocent grin.

Sarah didn't fall for it, he was sure. But she did let him off the hook. "Never mind," she murmured. "It's just that I could have sworn I heard a cat. What did you find so interesting in that newspaper, anyway?"

"Uh....just....cur-current events. Sorta."

Sarah sniffed. "I haven't read a newspaper in over a year. Too depressing. I could hardly get through one without wanting to bawl. There are so many bad things going on in this world, Gary. And by the time they make it to the newspaper it's too late. There isn't a damn thing anyone can do about it."

Having had her say, she settled her bare feet on the coffee table, and took a sip from her mug.

Gary simply stared at her. Her words had been impassioned and had struck a cord in him. As the silence grew, she looked over her mug at him, curious as to the change in atmosphere.

"Would you if you could?" Gary couldn't help asking softly.

"What?" Sarah laughed, denying the seriousness of his tone.

"Rhetorical question," Gary added quickly. "If you could do something

to stop just one bad thing in the world.... maybe just look in the paper and...change something, would you?"

Sarah stared back at him, seriously thinking about what he'd asked. Before she could answer, however, there was a discreet tap at the door.

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### Part Three

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Jeremy Rivers stepped into the suite and thought he caught a hint of tension in the air. He looked curiously from Gary to Sarah before wishing them both a quick good morning. Sarah made a cheery reply and moved toward the small kitchenette, a definite bounce to her step.

Gary remained seated in the livingroom area. His welcoming words were decidedly less bright, almost distracted. Maybe the guy just wasn't a morning person. Rivers gravitated automatically toward the more welcoming environment of the kitchenette.

Sarah offered him a danish and coffee, and though he'd had one downstairs, he accepted another. She seemed to so enjoy the small gesture of 'normal' life that he didn't want to refuse her. Rivers gazed surreptitiously toward Gary as she retrieved a cup from the cupboard and placed the danish on a plate. The day before he'd thought that there was more to Gary and Sarah's relationship than 'right place at the right time'. There had been a genuine chemistry between the two of them.

He'd worried that his trying to get her into the witness protection program would have caused friction as it would have broken up their relationship. But, now, Gary hardly seemed to notice that he was in the livingroom alone and that Rivers was the one in the kitchen with Sarah. Instead, his nose was buried in the newspaper.

Rivers watched the way Sarah's eyes flitted quickly to Gary before she handed over the coffee, and he began to realize that his instincts had been correct--at least halfway. That was just as well, since his superiors had shot down the idea of any sort of extended protection for Sarah. Never mind that she had handed over 90% of the damning evidence in the biggest house-cleaning operation in Agency history. Just one more reason he hated bureaucracy. He only hoped that ex-Agent McRoy was too busy trying to get out of the country to do Sarah any more harm.

As he began to speak softly to Sarah, mostly basic pleasantries, Gary caught one of Sarah's lingering looks. Rivers pretended not to notice the way their gazes held just a little too long before Sarah returned her attention to him. He was relieved at the new light he saw in her eyes. Sarah was his partner's widow, and she deserved a chance at life and love again. If Gary Hobson was the one she had her eye on--odd though the man was--Rivers wanted her to have that chance. He began to make his excuses.

"All of the necessary paperwork is taken care of and loose ends are tied up." He began speaking more loudly so as to include Gary in the

conversation. "If you two would like to do some sight-seeing before--"

Gary practically bounced up from the sofa. "Sight-seeing? No, no, no, no. I've got to get back to Chicago. You see, I have some rather urgent business to attend to. Is there any way we canâ€| uhâ€| leave soon?"

"Well," Rivers shrugged, masking his confusion. "We could move the schedule up, I guess." He turned to Sarah, wondering if she was as hasty to depart. If she was, her carefully closed expression wasn't telling. "The government will provide transportation home for you, if that's what you want. Our travel department can arrange it."

Sarah nodded her head. "That would be great. I'd like to stop back in Chicago first, though. There are a few things I'd like to do before I leave the state."

"Sure," Rivers smiled. "No problem. There's a shuttle between headquarters and the field office in Chicago that leaves in about 20 minutes. If we hurry, we could catch a ride."

Sarah half ran down the steps of the Agency field office in Chicago. The hurrying footsteps behind her could only be one person, but Sarah refused to turn around. He hadn't said one word to her after he'd announced how great a hurry he was in to get back to Chicago as soon as possible. Once Rivers had left them at the front of the building, the silence that had descended between them had been deafening. And Sarah could tell by the look in Gary's eyes that she was about to be ditched. Well, she didn't want to hear it. So she'd done the only thing she could do in such a situation, she turned and left before anything could be said.

"Sarah, please. Please wait." Gary's voice behind her. Something in his tone made her stop, close her eyes and curse herself as every kind of idiot for letting him get to her. He ran so hot and cool, she simply wasn't sure how to take him.

Gary reached her, touched her arm. Sarah offered her best blank expression to hide the fury beneath the surface. Far be it from her to force herself on someone who obviously didn't want her around. "What do you want?" she demanded.

"Why did you run off like that?" Gary was taken aback by her tone and actually looked mildly hurt.

Sarah closed her eyes and shook her head. The anger washed out of her in a receding wave. "Gary," she sighed. "I really appreciate all that you've done the past few of days. You've been a realâ€| guardian angel, but I know that you have things to do. I'll never forget you."

She walked to him and threw her arms around his waist. After a momentary hesitation, his arms went about her shoulders. She pushed back before she could get too comfortable. She had grown a little too accustomed to those arms recently.

"Thank you," She swallowed the lump in her throat, careful to avoid those muddy green eyes that would surely be her undoing. "Good-bye, Gary." She turned and walked. She wasn't sure where she was going,

she just knew that she had to get away.

"Sarah." She heard Gary calling her, but she kept going.

"Sarah." He caught up to her again. She stopped but didn't turn.

"Would you like a ride? I'm not sure how friendly Chuck is going to be, but we could probably use the van."

"I don't want to be a burden, Gary."

"You're not a burden," Gary admonished softly. "My business isn't until this afternoon. I didn't know that Agent Rivers would be able to get us back so fast."

Sarah turned and he offered a small smile. "That was my first helicopter ride."

Sarah smiled a little in return. "Mine, too."

"Makes you feel kind of important being flown around in Agency helicopters, doesn't it?" Gary continued, his smile growing.

"Yeah, kinda," Sarah agreed, grinning back at him.

"Too bad there aren't any Agency taxi's," Gary said, scanning the street before them. "But McGinty's isn't too far away." He reached a hand toward her, his eyes asking the silent question.

Sarah took his hand and they headed off down the street.

Gary found himself laughing at something Sarah had said as they stepped into McGinty's. The dim lighting, and quiet atmosphere caused them to self consciously stifle their mirth.

The mid-morning air had been chilly, and he had pretended not to be affected. But Sarah had figured it out, and thrown her arm around his waist and snuggled up against him insisting that it was the only way to stay warm--that and a dead taun-taun. But given a choice, she'd choose him. He'd thought that was one of the most ridiculous things he'd ever heard, but still he couldn't help laughing at her. He liked to see her laugh. And he liked the way his arm seemed to fit naturally around her.

They'd taken a route that lead them down Lincoln Street, and had stopped at many shops just to gaze at the merchandise. Sarah had seemed very interested in a particular leather shop which, along with general leather goods, also contained several more risquÃ© items. Of course, she hadn't been about to pass up the opportunity to tease him mercilessly with them.

As the door settled shut behind them, shutting out the street sounds, Chuck and Marissa rushed them. Both wore surprised expressions.

"What?" Gary asked, feeling suddenly self conscious. "Didn't Agent Rivers call last night and tell you we were all right?"

"Well, yeah," Chuck was the one who spoke first. "But I thought I

heard...like...laughter?" His friend's eyes were widened in disbelief. "Young lady, I think I need to shake your hand."

Sarah accepted Chuck's handshake with a wink in Gary's direction. Marissa simply smiled at Chuck's antics and re-introduced herself.

Gary wasn't sure how it happened, but Sarah ended up going back to the kitchen with Marissa to prepare hot chocolate. He was left to fend off Chuck's knowing chuckle. Denial only seemed to reinforce Chuck's accusations. When Sarah reappeared from the kitchen with a tray of mugs, it was simply the gentlemanly thing to take it and carry it to the table for her. It had absolutely nothing to do with the fact that he wanted to get away from a certain nosy friend.

After re-telling the story of what had taken place since he and Sarah had left the bar the day before, Gary bit the bullet and asked Chuck for his car again. To his surprise, Chuck answered yes with no argument. Gary had no idea what to make of that. But he wanted to leave before Chuck changed his mind. With a quick word to Sarah, he headed upstairs to find a jacket. Chuck got up hurriedly to follow.

"Now, Chuck," Gary was already on the defensive. He didn't need to hear anymore innuendo about him and Sarah.

His friend cut him off, explaining that things weren't exactly the way he had left them. Only then did Gary remember that his apartment had been broken into. Though Chuck and Marissa had done what they could to clear up most of the damage, several items were beyond repair. Gary was disheartened, and realized just how close the situation had been.

Thanking Chuck, he shrugged into a jacket before taking another look at the paper. Nothing had changed. Satisfied, he stuck the paper into his jacket and went back downstairs. Sarah was nowhere in sight.

"Where's--" he turned questioningly toward Marissa.

"She'll be back in a minute," Marissa said mysteriously.

"Where'd she go?" Gary wanted to know. He knew that there was something Marissa wasn't telling him.

"She'll be back," was all Marissa would say.

"All right," Gary sighed and settled in at the bar. You just couldn't force information out of Marissa. She either told you or she didn't.

"So what happened with the paper?" she asked.

"I guess it's giving me another light day," Gary said. "Nothing till three this afternoon."

"Could be she's meant for you." Marissa said, a small secretive smile hovered around her mouth.

"What?" Gary asked, startled. Not that the idea was totally surprising to him, but he was half-way wondering the same thing himself. They had certainly been tossed together often enough. But then, she would be going home soon. What more could there be? Virginia was a long way.

"You heard me," Marissa told him. "And I have a feeling she feels the same way."

"Well I don't know about that, Marissa. She's going to be going back home to be with her family."

Marissa shrugged, and was about to reply but the front door opened. Sarah entered, followed by Chuck. Gary did a double take. Chuck was smiling secretively, as was Marissa.

"Ready?" Sarah asked expectantly. Gary couldn't shake the feeling that they were all up to something.

"Yeah," he answered, casting suspicious glances all around. He'd have to try to figure out what they had up their sleeves when he got back. He turned and ushered Sarah out the front door.

"What was that all about?" he asked, unable to miss the small self-satisfied smile that hovered about her lips.

"What was what about?" she returned, the picture of innocence.

Gary sighed. "Never mind."

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#### Part Four

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Sarah settled back into the seat as they drove along Elms Street, preparing to turn onto Templeton. The memories were overwhelming here. Not because she'd lived there long--she'd only really been there roughly six weeks. But this was where she'd met the two elderly women who'd given her a chance. This was the last place she'd lived on the run. This was the place she'd met Gary that fateful night that her past caught up to her.

Gary seemed to sense her mood, allowing a companionable silence to settle in the vehicle. When they pulled to the curb alongside the large house which had been converted to smaller apartments, Sarah simply sat and looked at it for a few moments. It was just an old building. Not especially attractive, or even sturdy--just old. She got out of the car, and Gary followed her lead.

Once inside the building, she was startled by a loud thump. She turned to see a spindly-legged old man approaching from a darkened apartment at what was probably top speed. A weathered tool belt was wrapped around his narrow waist. "Is that you, gal?" the old man asked, squinting merrily.

"Mr. Francis!" Sarah exclaimed. "Of course, it's me. Where are Agnes and Ida?"

Mr. Francis laughed and danced a stiff little jig. "I told them you was okay. After all that shooting, we didn't know if we would ever see you again. But we kept your room for you, just like you left it."

"Thank you, Mr. Francis," Sarah smiled at him. "I really appreciate that."

"Is he your beau?" Francis asked, nodding in Gary's direction. "He's a mighty fine looking gent. Kinda reminds me of myself in the day. I could knock the ladies dead, yes indeed."

Sarah stifled a laugh at Gary's embarrassment. Ichobad Francis was never one to hold his tongue. "This is Gary Hobson, Mr. Francis. He's . . . helping me." Gary smiled and nodded toward the man.

Francis slapped one leg and hooted with laughter. Then winking at Sarah, "Helping you, heh? Now that's about the most original way I've ever heard tell of courtin'."

Sarah fought to keep from blushing. It would only encourage the man. And knowing that it was completely useless to try to stop him once he was on a roll, she let the subject drop. Gary, however, seemed inclined to rescue her honor. Fortunately he was tuned into the minute shake of her head alerting him that such would only make matters worse.

Catching on mid-sentence, he managed to change his statement to a question about the time of the building's construction. As resident handy man, Francis had a \*\*lot\*\* to say about the building. Sarah patted Gary gratefully on the back and left the men to it as she went in to pack the few remaining items that she had left behind.

The tiny apartment was dim and sparsely furnished. A set of yellow curtains was hanging at the false window of the small kitchen area. Ida had given her those to help cheer up the place. Sarah didn't know what she would do with them, but she took them along anyway. The simple act of pulling them down and folding them caused a lump in her throat.

There were several small potted plants and a few other items. Everything that belonged to her fit into a single box and a duffel bag. A pathetic statement of the way she had survived for the past few months. It was the people she had met near the end of her run that showed her how to live again. She couldn't fit those people in a box, and she couldn't take them with her.

Trying to shake off her melancholy mood, she turned off the lights and closed the door on the small apartment for the last time. Agnes and Ida's apartment was along the hallway. She tapped at the door, wondering that they hadn't come out yet.

Finding no answer, she wandered down the steps to where she'd left Gary with Mr. Francis. The older gent was forcing a box full of glass bulbs containing colored candle wax into the younger man's hands. "My girls make them," he said. "Blasted things are all over the place. Better than that 'roma-therapy' they tell me. I ain't too sure; the sniffer ain't what it used to be."

Gary attempted to politely decline, but the old fellow wasn't having

it. Gary speared her with an anxious look that just begged for assistance. The best Sarah could do was to offer him her box. He placed Francis's box on the step and took Sarah's.

"Agnes and Ida aren't back yet, Mr. Francis," she interrupted the old man's ruminations about the number of different colors the candles came in. "Did they go to the market?"

Francis' eyes clouded over and he told her that they'd gone to work early to help with a big order and wouldn't be home until near midnight. He added a few words about the state of the world when women were working all hours. He'd never approved of the swing shift at the bakery. He and Ida went a round about it at least once a week.

Sarah felt new reason to feel guilty. She'd forgotten about the extra work at the bakery. That was part of the reason she had been hired there. Now, the others were having to take up her slack. She glanced down at her watch and made a decision.

"Mr. Francis, I'm going home," she explained. "I just came for the rest of my things. Would you tell Ida and Agnes good-bye for me, and that I'll miss them and that I'll write?"

"Awww," Mr. Francis sighed. "Well, we knew something like this had to happen sooner or later." He pointed a finger toward Gary. "You just make sure you take this one with you." He put a hand up to one side of his face and stage-whispered, "He's a keeper. Make sure he shares his candles."

Sarah shook her head and hugged the man. "I'm going to miss you, Mr. Francis."

The old man patted her back and then moved away. "Yeah, yeah," he muttered. "But I won't be passing any message on to the girls for you."

Sarah's heart fell. Mr. Francis' face was stubborn; he meant what he said. Maybe she could leave them a note. Then the old man's wizened features changed to a warm smile. "You're just going to have to go over to that factory and say it yourself. Real proper like they'd want you to."

Sarah hugged the crazy old man again. Then she glanced quickly at her watch and then toward Gary. It was long past the lunch hour and his business still loomed over her head. Not to mention that she still had to settle up her rent with the landlord.

Gary nodded slightly. She thanked him with her smile.

Gary pulled Chuck's car back out into traffic amid Sarah's third apology for holding him up. They'd spent far longer than either of them had expected haggling with the landlord. The man was a menace to fair housing. It was after 2:30 by the time they settled on an agreeable price and made it out of the man's office.

Now, the way Gary saw it, he had two options. He could either allow Sarah to keep Chuck's car so that she could go to say good-bye to the two women from her apartment--but somehow, he figured that would be pushing his luck with Chuck. Or he could make up some excuse and take

Sarah with him to the upholstery shop. He made up an excuse.

Traffic wasn't too bad and he was able to reach the waterfront district with nearly ten minutes to spare. Now, he simply had to find a way to slip his paper out so he could check for new developments as well as get a better idea just where the place was. Many of the establishments didn't have very obvious signs to help him along.

"Is this where your business is?" Sarah asked as he pulled the car to a stop near one of the buildings.

"Huh?" Gary asked, dragged out of his thoughts. "Oh. . . yeah. It's right . . . around here," he pointed vaguely off to the left. He felt more uncomfortable than usual uttering the deceptive words.

"Really?" Sarah gazed around the area.

"Yeah?" He replied.

"This is where Agnes and Ida are," she told him, a low edge of surprise in her voice. "Now they'll get to meet you." She pushed opened her door and climbed out.

"Great," Gary managed to force some enthusiasm into his reply. "But, I'm looking for the upholstery shop. I didn't know they worked in an upholstery shop."

"Upholstery shop?" Sarah frowned across the roof of the car at him. "There's an upholstery products warehouse, among other things. It's over there." She pointed to a building in the opposite direction of where Gary had originally pointed. "I'm surprised you know about it. It's not exactly listed with the Better Business Bureau."

"Oh?" Gary laughed nervously. "A friend recommended it to me. I must have gotten turned around. W-why don't you go on and see your friends. I can meet you back here afterward?"

Sarah looked mildly confused but smiled. "Sure. But I'm warning you: Don't buy anything from those guys--most of that stuff is probably hotter than s'mores at a campfire."

"Thanks, I'll remember that." Gary waved and hurried across the open asphalt as quickly as he could. He was down to 5 minutes and he had yet to locate the possible victim. After a quick glance over his shoulder, he pulled out the newspaper. The incident was to take place in a second floor office. There was no information on which second floor office.

The only entry that he could see was a door near the side of a loading dock. He rushed toward it, past a mass of bodies huddled around a burning bin, puffing on cigarettes. One of the men, a burly fellow, dressed in dirty overalls, stepped from among the group.

"Hey? You? You here to use the phone?"

"Uh? Yeah," Gary agreed quickly. He really didn't have time to

convince anyone of the seriousness of the situation. "It's an emergency."

"Well you don't look like the bakery types, but go ahead." The man waved a hand. "One of your co-workers is already up there, so you're going to have to wait your turn. And tell that boss of yours that he needs to get that phone of his fixed! I can't keep babysitting you people."

"Right," Gary nodded, continuing on toward the building.

The burly man waved him off and went back to his smoke break.

Gary hurried on into the dim warehouse and toward a rickety flight of stairs that were built along a wall. A door at the top was marked 'offices'. As he bounded up the steps two at a time, he couldn't help but feel as if time was running out. The ghost edges of smoke that seeped out beneath the door served to confirm his fears.

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#### \*\*Part Five\*\*

"Fire!" Gary yelled as he yanked the door open. A thick haze of smoke buffeted him almost immediately. The acrid cloud began an assault on his nostrils and eyes, causing him to take a reflexive step backward. He gagged, and his eyes smarted as he pushed himself forward into the gloom.

"Hello?" He yelled, fighting the effects of the smoke as he began to move through the stuff. His mind registered surprise that the narrow corridor in which he found himself was cool. He couldn't hear the tell-tell crackling of a blaze; the place was eerily silent save for a softly muffled click-ticking sound somewhere ahead.

"Is there anyone in here?" He called again, more weakly. The noxious smoke was taking its toll. Already his vision was so blurred that he could barely see and his lungs were screaming for clear air. Hunkering down, he tried to remember his school-age lessons about what to do in case of a fire. Wasn't there supposed to be clearer air near floor level?

Finding some relief, but not much, he continued on, holding his breath and covering his nose and mouth with his shirt tails. The first doorway he reached seemed to literally be belching the smoke, and the click-ticking was louder. He made his way into the room as fast as he could. All manner of items seemed to be stacked all over the place in disarray, but the thick smoke marred his vision, rendering the items as little more than hulking piles.

"Hello?" He croaked, cutting into his precious supply of oxygen. An all-too-human sound from the opposite side of the room brought him to a startled halt, then spurred him into faster action. His knee found a desk and then moments later, he found the slight form of a woman lying on the floor. She moaned, but didn't make any other motions.

Gary carefully lifted the woman into his arms, and started to make his way out of the room. Weakening from the smoke and exertion, he

stumbled into one of the stacks. He saw the hazy outline of the pile wavering before tumbling down toward him. He covered the woman as best as he could as he tried to avoid the path of the ceiling high mound. He didn't make it away in time.

Stacks of what was beginning to feel like sofa cushions fell on him as he struggled toward the door, forcing him to suck in a lung full of the noxious clouds. He gagged, nearly retching and climbed back to his knees. He still had the woman. He looked about, having lost his bearings, for the door. Something glowing red off to one side caught his eye. A heater. It was melting its way into the foam and nearby pillows and fabrics.

Carefully lying the woman on a cushion, Gary went in search of the heater's power source. He yanked it out of the wall and rushed back to the woman. Black spots were starting to appear in his vision by the time he managed to get her back into his arms.

The smoke cleared somewhat as he stumbled into the hallway and headed left toward the stairs. He thought he heard the booming voice of burly guy along with several others. The sound of footsteps on the stairs was music to his ears.

He vaguely registered someone removing his burden from his arms and leading him the rest of the way down the stairs. His next conscious thought was when his vision cleared, minutes or seconds later, he wasn't sure, just outside of the warehouse. He was sitting on cold cement steps, leaning against the wall.

He gazed hazily around and found Sarah looking at him worriedly. Two women stood beyond him wringing their hands. They didn't seem to know whether to go to him or toward the woman that the paramedics were working on.

"Are you all right?" Sarah asked him.

"Yeah," he managed weakly, trying to make his way to his feet. He wavered slightly, but Sarah was there. "What happened?" he asked.

"You saved Sandy's Colchau's life," Sarah told him. "You pulled her out of the smoke, and now it looks like she's going to be okay. It's a good thing we got here when we did."

"Yeah," Gary said. His lungs and mouth and throat all seemed to be filled with the smell of burning foam. He made tentative steps toward the car. He just needed to get home and get that smell off of him and then he would be okay.

"Where are you going?" Sarah held him back a little.

"Home," Gary said. "I need to change."

"You need to get checked out," Sarah disagreed. "I have two paramedics to back me up on that. And I have the keys." She dangled them in front of him.

Gary sighed and nodded. He really didn't have the strength to argue with her. He went through the motions of meeting Agnes and Ida before Sarah led him to the car. He didn't even fight with her about who was

going to drive.

Sarah looked down at Gary as he lay on the gurney, an oxygen mask over his face. "How much longer?" he asked, moving the cup from his face.

"A lot longer, if you keep taking that off," Sarah assured him. He was obviously feeling better; he was fighting her every step of the way to recovery. Despite the doctor's warning that one had to be careful with smoke inhalation, Gary acted as if he were the exception to the medical rule.

Gary sighed with exasperation, "But I feel fine," he said, sitting up. "I've been doing this long enough--"

"Why don't you let me be the judge of that?" the doctor walked into the room. He threw an admonishing look in Gary's direction as he approached his bedside. Sarah looked on smugly as Gary settled back against the bed and obediently placed the mask over his face.

The doctor completed his examination of him and told him that he was good to go, but that he should take it easy for a few days. Gary listened with half an ear, anxious only to get out of the door. Sarah could only shake her head as they passed through the hospital exit.

"You may be my hero, Gary Hobson, but you are a horrible patient."

Gary and Sarah arrived at the bar near the end of the dinner hour. Marissa noticed first the smell that clung to Gary. That led to an explanation of the things that had taken place that day. Chuck and Marissa expressed concern for Gary and told him that he really should be more careful. Sarah took exception to their comments.

"You guys act like this is a normal everyday occurrence. Gary saved someone's life today! Someone is alive because he helped. I think that's special in this world. Gary Hobson is a helper, and he cares. That is one of the things I like about him."

There was a moment of silence around the table. Gary had absolutely no idea what to say. He simply stared across at Sarah, her determined gaze telling him that she meant every word that she said. Marissa was the one who spoke up first in the quiet.

"You're absolutely right, Sarah. It is easy to begin to take things for granted. And you're also right that Gary is a special guy."

Chuck picked up his glass and raised it. "To Gary," he said, eyeing his friend warmly. Gary was beginning to feel uncomfortable with all the fawning. But not for long, because Chuck next words ended that thought.

"May he smell better soon."

Marissa rolled her eyes, and Sarah smiled wryly.

"It's true," Chuck tried to defend his words. "He smells like the Energizer Bunny when into a rubber shop and exploded."

"Thanks, Chuck," Gary grinned in his direction. "I get the point." With that, he left his friends and went upstairs to take a much needed shower.

"I hope that smell isn't in my car," was Chuck's parting shot.

Sarah and Marissa were putting the finishing touches on a late dinner when Gary appeared again. Freshly showered, he drew Sarah's gaze like a magnet. She lost the train of whatever she'd been saying to Marissa.

The blind woman smiled slightly, before telling Sarah that she wouldn't be having dinner with them but that she needed to get home. She called Chuck into the office with her as she disappeared leaving Sarah and Gary alone in the empty restaurant.

"You smell wonderful," Sarah told him when he came closer.

"Not like a blown up Energizer Bunny?"

"Not at all," Sarah laughed. She walked up to him, put her arms around his middle and squeezed. Gary's arms went around her shoulders and they stayed that way for a few moments, each enjoying the flow of warmth and comfort between them.

"I think we've lost our dinner companions," Sarah pulled back slightly to look up at him. Gary looked down into her eyes.

"They'll be back in the morning," he said softly.

"Very nice of them," Sarah returned, feeling herself drawn into the magical atmosphere that seemed to have encircled them. "I'll have to remember to thank them."

"Yeah," was all Gary said before he kissed her. She felt it all the way to her knees before she pulled away. There was something that she had to tell him before they could go any further.

But first: "Close your eyes." She told him, taking a step backward out of his arms.

"They were closed a second ago," Gary reminded her with a smile that made her want to postpone her little announcement.

"You, Sir, are dangerous," she told him with a look. "Now, close your eyes." Gary obliged and she went behind the bar to retrieve the package that had arrived while she and Gary were out. She slipped the item out of the bag and held it to herself, taking in its rich scent, a scent that would soon be mingled with his.

Moving back toward him, she began to try to slip the item over his shoulders. Gary's eyes opened immediately. He took in the black leather jacket with stunned surprise.

"Sarah. . . You didn't have to do this." The leather jacket was almost identical to the one that had been ruined after he had been shot.

"I did, and I wanted to," she told him. It was a perfect fit with Chuck's assistance. Marissa had provided cover while she and Chuck had dashed over to the leather shop that morning. "It looks great on you."

"But you shouldn't be spending your money on--"

"Don't worry, Gary," she shushed him. "That's what I need to talk to you about. Why don't we sit and talk over dinner?"

"Okay," Gary nodded, carefully placing the jacket over the back of the chair. He waited patiently after they sat for her to begin.

"I talked to Agent Rivers again," she told him. "I've got insurance money coming. . . from Frank," she didn't tell him that she had bought the jacket before she had found out about the insurance money. "I've also learned that a flight has been scheduled for tomorrow morning at 10. I'll be going home, Gary."

Gary nodded, but didn't speak. His eyes said it all for him. If she had ever doubted that he felt something for her, she didn't at that moment.

"That's something I've been wanting to do for a long time," Sarah pressed on. "To see my family, again. My brothers. My mother." She wondered if he could hear the sound of her heart breaking, breaking because being with her family meant that she had to leave him.

"You're welcome back any time you want," Gary said.

"Thank you," Sarah managed and reached across the table to twine her fingers with his. Then in an attempt to lift the mood, "Now, let's enjoy this wonderful meal."

Neither ate very much, but they talked well into the night. They cleaned up the dishes together and went up to Gary's apartment and talked some more. It was as if neither of them wanted the night to end, knowing it would be their last.

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## Part Six

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Gary woke up to the wonderful smell of coffee brewing. His opened one eye a crack and glanced around the room before rolling over to snuggle deeper into the bedclothes. Something stopped him, though. Some subtle shading of the light, or maybe the way the sun shone across his bed. A nervous suspicion rammed through him and he sat straight up in bed.

Time? What time was it? He looked toward his bedside clock: 7:17. Seven, seventeen!!

"Good morning, sleepy head," Sarah's smiling voice startled him half out of his wits; his entire body jerked as he spun to face her. A second's glance at the orange tabby curled contentedly in her arms

and he almost cried out.

"W-W-What's he doing in here?"

"You mean he's not your cat?" Sarah asked, frowning as she rubbed at the cat's head. "He came right up to your door like he lives here. I hope you don't have a cat living downstairs in the restaurant. I think the health department would frown on that, Gary. Do you mind if he stays for a little while?"

"I don't mind," Gary murmured, thinking very quickly. "He kind of comes and he goes."

While Sarah continued to stroke the happy feline, Gary got to his feet. He only half-listened as he searched the apartment for the other half of his usual early morning arrivals. If the cat was there, it stood to reason that the paper was there. Right? If not, then. . . then. . . Then what?

"Didn't my alarm go off?" he wanted to know. The thought occurred to him as he checked beneath the bed. He always set the thing for exactly six-thirty and he never, ever, turned down the volume.

Sarah shrugged, following his progress with a curious frown. "Yeah. But you were sleeping so soundly. I didn't want to wake you. You had a very busy day yesterday. And you're grouchy in the morning." The last was half whispered.

"What was that?" Gary asked, popping his head back up over the side of the bed. Sarah's words had been muffled from his position and he couldn't be entirely sure of what he had heard.

"Nothing," Sarah smiled sweetly at him and went back to her fawning over the cat.

Gary nodded. It just figured. No paper on the bedside; no paper on the table. No paper under the table. Where the hell was the thing? Maybe. . . Just maybe . . . He headed for the door.

"Oh, are you looking for the paper?" Sarah's voice cut into his thoughts just as his hand touched the knob.

Gary froze, quickly running through his options. What if she knew, or suspected? Would she be like Meredith? Would she take the paper and run? "Yeah," he stated, terrified of the outcome.

"Here it is," she smiled and held it out to him. Then laughing, "I think it came with the cat."

Gary chuckled nervously back at her before heading to the kitchen for coffee. Her eyes had been innocent. He felt sure that she had no idea that he got tomorrow's paper. But still it had been a close call. One more reason why he had to be more careful. Only those that he trusted, that he truly cared about could know about the paper.

Did he trust Sarah? Did he truly care about her?

"Mind if I grab a shower while you're reading?" Sarah asked, interrupting his thoughts. She placed the cat on the floor in the

kitchen as she awaited his response. The traitorous creature coiled itself around her feet, purring contentedly.

"Sure, no problem," Gary responded, watching her leave the room. He shot an evil look toward the cat, hoping that somewhere in that feline brain it got his message. Then with a huff, he opened the paper and began reading. The day was definitely going to be busier than the day before.

The first he could handle with a simple phone call while Sarah was in the shower. The second actually took place at the airport. It would be tricky, but he could probably fit it in somehow. And the remainder was in the afternoon.

Calmer, since he knew what the paper held, he went about the business of preparing for the day. First, breakfast with Sarah. He probably owed her after the way he'd practically bitten her head off. Grouchy in the morning? Who wouldn't be grouchy if they had to wake up to what he woke up to?

After breakfast, he would take Sarah to the airport.

As it turned out, Marissa and Chuck wanted to come along as well. Which turned out to be a good thing since they ran cover while he convinced a man in a restaurant near Sarah's gate that wolfing an Egg McMuffin was a severe choking hazard that he really didn't want to take on that day.

A table full of school aged children looked on wide-eyed as he tried to explain the finer points of completely chewing one's food. The man was vocally unappreciative and didn't thank him for his efforts. But the story about the man choking to death was replaced by an advertisement about some resort's Good Samaritan contest. Obviously the man would live to wolf down his food another day and that was all that Gary cared about.

Agent Jeremy Rivers settled against the departure counter as he watched without appearing to watch the couple that was standing twenty feet away from him. He couldn't make out what they were saying, but he could guess. Sarah Reynolds and Gary Hobson were saying good-bye.

He looked beyond the couple toward Hobson's friends; the short guy and the blind woman. Having already given their good-byes to Sarah, the two had retreated a few feet away to give the couple some privacy. And unless Rivers was mistaken, Hobson's friends appeared to be arguing about something under their breaths. He was sure of it when the woman made an expression of utter exasperation. He almost chuckled out loud. Somehow, the short guy looked as if he could be very exasperating.

His gaze returned to Sarah and Hobson when Sarah stood on tip-toe and kissed Hobson. Rivers thought that Hobson would have had to be a fool not to respond to her. Hobson was no fool. Rivers did chuckle a little then. Maybe there was hope for the man, after all. In either case, it was none of his business any longer.

Having called in a few favors, he had managed to get limited protection for Sarah out of the Virginia office. Not that a week was a lot of time as far as things went, but it would allow the agency a

chance to catch up with McRoy, or at least determine his whereabouts or intentions. And he, himself, would be escorting Sarah home. He hadn't been the one to watch over her in her true hour of need, as had Hobson. But he would see her on the final leg of her journey. Frank would have wanted that.

As Sarah walked toward him, he allowed a small smile past his professional exterior and led her through the entry gate and onto the plane. Judging from the look on Sarah's face, it was going to be a very long flight to Virginia.

--morning, Chicago. This morning's broadcast is brought to you by Sullivan Inns. Only two more weeks to get in your nomi--" Gary, wide awake and fully dressed, reached over and shut off the announcer's voice. Moments later, he heard the distinctive slap of the newspaper's arrival. He went to the door to retrieve it.

"You don't exactly look like a ray of sunshine, yourself," he said to the cat as he reached toward the floor. Cat merely mewed before trotting into the apartment for his obligatory bowl of milk.

Gary thumbed through the paper while the cat lapped contentedly. It looked like it was going to be a busy day which was just as good. Gary liked busy, that way he didn't have to think too much about his own problems.

Five days had passed since Sarah had returned home and despite the small amount of time she and Gary had actually been together, Gary missed her. The days seemed a little hollower, as if something were missing. So he crammed as many rescues into his day as he could, seldom arriving home before late when he would fall into bed exhausted. A point which Marissa and/or Chuck confronted him on whenever they could catch him.

Quickly dressing in jeans and a sweater, he threw on a brown stadium jacket. He couldn't quite bring himself to wear the black leather jacket again just yet. It reminded him too much of Sarah. He needed to get her out of his system so that he could move on. Then he would wear the jacket, he told himself.

He hurried out into the Chicago morning, heading toward E Avenue where a dog walker was about to spend an hour rounding up dogs that had escaped her care. The situation was going to cause a bratwurst truck to career out of control and ram into the side of a bread truck. No one would be hurt, but the incident would tie up traffic for the better part of the morning.

When he returned, two hours later, the mailman was dropping off the mail. Gary gathered it up and headed toward the office. He had just enough time to grab a bite to eat and get the smell of diesel fuel out of his jeans before he had to leave again.

Flipping through the stack of bills and advertisements, a postcard containing the image of a quaint old house caught his attention. Mirabel's Bed & Breakfast was writing across the bottom of the picture in elaborate script. On the back was the address and contact information. Mirabel's Bed & Breakfast was in Virginia.

Gary's heart skipped a beat when he saw the salutation at the bottom of the message. 'Love, Sarah'. His eyes back-tracked to read the rest

of the message. Sarah was fine and her family was doing well. If he wanted to talk, he could call.

Gary looked uneasily from the numbers to the phone. Eleven digits and he could hear her voice. Just eleven digits. Gary picked up the phone. He and Sarah talked through what should have been his lunch and clothes changing time. When he left the restaurant that evening, he was wearing a black leather jacket.

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## Part 7

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"You know, everyone is starting to wonder if you're real or not."

"How do you mean?" Gary asked, pausing in his perusal of the paper. Sarah had laughed a little when she said the words, but even half-distracted as he was, he couldn't miss the mild accusation in her tone.

"You know what I'm talking about, Gary." She was right; he did know, but that didn't mean he couldn't hope he was wrong. Sarah had left Chicago nearly six weeks earlier to be with her family on the East Coast. And for the past two weeks she had been asking him to come out and visit to meet them all, and to see the non-profit organization that she had set up for people in need. But he just couldn't get away, he had the paper to think about. He had his own brand of people in need.

"Sarah," he sighed, speaking very gently, hoping she could understand, just one more time. "I - I just can't get away right now. There's so much to do." As he'd done twice in the last few minutes, he glanced at the clock. He only had a minute or so before he had to leave, which made matters worse. He didn't want her to think that he didn't want to talk to her. "Hey... I, uh -- "

Sarah cut him off. "I understand Gary, no problem." Her tone suggested otherwise. "Listen, I gotta go, too. See ya." She hung up the phone without waiting for his response.

Gary clicked off the phone and settled his elbows on his knees, his head in his hands. Quietly, he ground out his frustration. He was losing her; he could feel it. The paper was going to ruin this for him, just like it had the others. Why couldn't he have a life? Why? In a sudden burst of fury, he tossed the paper against the far wall, shouting his displeasure. But the paper merely fluttered silently to the floor, mocking him.

The ringing of phone jarred him, and he turned toward it, then caught a glimpse of the clock. He stood momentarily torn. That had to be Sarah. But he had to go. Now. There was no time. Resigning himself, he made his choice. Gathering up the scattered pages of the newspaper, he hurried out the door. The ringing of the phone was a bitter echo in the back of his mind of what had to come first in his life. There was a child to be saved from a hit and run, who was he to say that wasn't going to happen so he could talk to his girlfriend?

~\*~

Mariissa waved a hand as Gary rumbled down the stairs and out of the door. He gave barely a grunt of acknowledgment. She shook her head frowning, and went back to work.

"Hmmm, Mr. Grumpy is back. Sarah must have called again." Chuck said, glancing up from what he was doing. Both he and Mariissa had followed the pattern of what had been taking place for the past week or so. On days he didn't hear from Sarah, he was quieter and slightly withdrawn. But on days that he did, he put new meaning to the word touchy. Then within a few hours he would go back to withdrawn.

Mariissa stopped what she was doing. "We need to do something to help him," she said. "We're his friends. We're supposed to be here for him, to help him."

"The best thing we can do for them is to break them up," Chuck said, matter-of-factly.

"I don't think that's exactly the solution we're looking for," Mariissa said dryly.

Chuck was undeterred. "Long distance relationships never work," he insisted. Continuing, "And I read someplace that the ones that begin under high stress situations always fail. So, they've already got two strikes against them. Trust me on this. It'd be the best thing for him. Couple weeks, he'll be back to normal. There's plenty other fish in the sea. Closer, not related to the paper, fish."

Mariissa rolled her eyes and went back to work. She should have known that would be Chuck's solution. She would have to come up with something on her own. A small smile touched the corners of her lips as an idea began to germinate in the back of her mind.

Gary reached the park at a run. Sprinting through the sands of the playground, he heard a woman calling for Joey to come back. The woman was leaning over another child that was sitting in a stroller, and her back was partially turned. There was no way she could see the car that would soon appear around the bend. There was no way she would be able to reach little Joey in time. And there would be no time for the driver to see the small child.

Putting on an additional burst of speed, Gary shot across the grass and toward the toddling child. The small boy was laughing, innocently unaware that the game he played was deadly as he stepped off the sidewalk into the street.

"Joey!" Gary yelled, reaching the sidewalk just as he heard the car's engine. Desperately, he grasped for the child, in an attempt to pull him out of harm's way. The little boy, giggling, wriggled away from Gary's grasp toddling on across the street. The next thing Gary heard was the sound of squealing tires. He never saw the approaching car, only felt the sudden impact of his shoulder against something hard and unforgiving, and then sudden motion, blurring images and another painful jolt. His breath went out of him with a whoosh.

His next coherent memory was off hearing frantic voices, and a child

crying. The words came from a long distance and seemed to tumble over one another, confusing themselves in his mind, serving only to accentuate the pain pounding in his temples. He focused on the crying child. That he could understand. The child was whimpering pitifully, as if desperately afraid. He wanted to help.

Fighting through layer after layer, he forced his eyes to open. At first the round blobs were unfamiliar, but then they resolved into only mildly unfocused faces; strangers, all looking worriedly down at him. Turning away from them, he followed the earlier sound of the child. He reached an arm in the direction of the sound, groaning at the pain it caused his aching body.

"It's all right," he rasped, stumbling over the words. "J-Joey." The name came to him. The child's cries began to quiet, and as Gary's vision cleared further, he realized that the mother was muttering words of assurance to her small son.

Others around him were encouraging them to lie still. Ignoring them, he moved unsteadily to his feet. A young man, no doubt the driver of the car, was frantic to ascertain if Gary was okay. Gary assured him that he was, but continued to watch the dark-haired little boy who'd settled into his mother's arms, his small head in the crook of her neck.

The boy's tearful eyes followed Gary as his mother told him how thankful she was that he'd come when he had, and was he sure he didn't need to see a doctor. Gary nodded that he was fine, and that she was welcome. When the father of the children arrived, he found an opportunity to make his escape.

Later, as he gazed sightlessly out of the window on the L, the image of little Joey remained with him. The child couldn't have been more than three, but something about him had struck Gary oddly, almost as if he knew him. He wondered at that. He was sure he hadn't rescued the boy on any other occasion. It wasn't until the train passed through a tunnel and he clearly saw his own image reflected back that it occurred to him why he'd been so affected. The little boy was himself! He'd looked amazingly as Gary had as a young boy.

He blinked his surprise at that realization, and then settled again against the window, allowing his mind to continue its meandering course. He wondered what a child of his would be like. If he had a little boy, would he look as young Joey had? Or if he had a little girl, would she look like... He didn't complete the thought, but sat up straighter. He couldn't travel down that path. He obviously wasn't meant to have that kind of a future.

Attempting to focus elsewhere, he glanced around the half-occupied train. Directly across from him a woman, very far along in her pregnancy, sat with a hand placed over her belly. Further along the bench, another woman was reading a book. The cover, containing a scantily clad female and a man with a chest that fairy-tales were made of, was clearly visible, as was the title: 'Rapturously Yours'.

Gary allowed his gaze to continue onward. A man dressed in a business suit was talking on a cell phone. A thick gold band was around the fourth finger on his left hand. Gary caught some of the man's conversation: "Love you, too honey. Daddy will see you tomorrow."

Gary closed his eyes. Why was it that the very thoughts he sought to avoid were right there in front of him? In triplicate?

By the time he arrived back to the bar, night had fallen and the dinner hour was in full swing. His hopes of slipping quietly upstairs were dashed when Marissa called to him as soon as his foot touched the bottom step. He was half-tempted to go on up, pretending that he hadn't noticed her call. But Marissa called his name again and a wave of guilt settled over him at what he had been contemplating.

"Yeah?" he asked, making his way reluctantly toward her. "I was just gonna go upstairs and--"

"Can we talk for a few minutes, first?" Marissa asked him pointedly. Without waiting for an answer, she made her way back toward the office. Gary had no choice but to follow her. He sighed impatiently; he really didn't need this right now.

"So, what's going on?" Marissa turned on him as soon as the office door closed. Her arms were folded in a no-nonsense manner that meant she was on a mission.

"Nothing's going on, Marissa," Gary evaded the issue. "I'm just busy with the paper is all."

"With the paper?" Marissa asked innocently, not really waiting for an answer. "I imagine that's part of the problem, then."

Gary wanted to argue and tell her she was wrong but he was too tired of fighting it. He settled into the desk chair and ran a hand through his hair. "That's the whole, problem, Marissa. I'm always running out or not here or can't talk to her. I can't always explain where I've been. . . She thinks that I don't want to see her anymore."

"Have you told her that you do still want to have a relationship with her?" Marissa asked gently.

"Yeah," Gary nodded, feeling more miserable. "Lots of times. But that doesn't work anymore. She doesn't believe me. I don't want to lose her, Marissa. But how can I lose someone I don't even have? I mean, she's there and I'm here. These. . . long distance relationships, they don't last anyway, right? I should just--"

"Go see her, Gary." Marissa's words were spoken so softly that Gary had to stop and do a double take to be sure he had heard her correctly.

"What did you say?" he asked.

"I said, go see her," Marissa repeated. "Take some time. Go prove how you feel about her."

Gary's face fell. "I can't do that," he said quietly. "I don't get vacations from the paper. I have to keep going. People's lives depend on me doing what I do."

"Gary," Marissa tried to reason with him. "Why would the paper bring

Sarah into your life if it didn't mean for you two to be together?"

"I don't know," Gary said a little more forcefully than he intended. Moving agitatedly to his feet, he paced a few steps. "Why does it do anything?" he demanded. "Why did it bring Emma into my life? Answer me that."

"I can't answer that," Marissa replied. "But I can tell you that you get that paper for a reason and that no one expects you to go it alone. You and Sarah have something very special that you shouldn't just let go away without a fight. Remember what Snow said, Gary? He said to live your life. And now you are going to have to decide if Sarah is an important enough reason for you to start doing that."

Gary stared after Marissa as she left the office. He would have thought that she would have understood about the paper. Chuck was the one he would have expected to tell him to abandon it. Feeling even more tired, he left the office and went upstairs to his lonely apartment. The blinking message light was his only companion.

He went over to the machine and pushed the review button, then settled on the sofa with a sigh. There was one message. It was from Sarah. She told him that it was over.

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Part 8

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"I'm telling you buddy, it's for the best." Chuck was saying. Gary glanced up at his friend then dropped his head back into his hands. He was probably right. He couldn't balance a personal life with the paper. It just wasn't meant to be.

"What you need," Chuck was continuing, "Is to find someone closer to home. I met this girl yesterday--hot, smoking hot--and I think she has a soft spot for the Boy Scout types like you. I can call her and set it up. All you'll--"

"That's okay, Chuck," Gary said softly, not lifting his head.

"Awww, come on, buddy. She's got this roommate named Karen, thatâ€¢"

"No. Thank you, Chuck," Gary tried again. Maybe Chuck wasn't right, after all. Chuck was just being Chuck.

"But, Gare! She's got. . .these. . ."

"Leave him alone." Marissa came into the room. "Can't you see he's hurting? He needs our support right now. Not you trying to set him up with some woman you barely know. He needs compassion and understanding."

Gary groaned under his breath. He wasn't like some sick patient who needed to be handled carefully. He just needed. . . He needed. . .

Hell, he didn't know what he needed.

"I am supporting him, Marissa," Chuck was continuing to argue with Marissa. "I'm being a friend and trying to fix him up with a beautiful woman--even better than compassion and understanding. The man needs a date! Someone who will make him forget. He's been moping around here long enough."

"A date?" Marissa sighed in disgust. "What Gary needs is some time to think. If we really want to help him, we'll--"

Gary had enough. "I don't need help and I don't need a date," he sat up and declared to his friends. "And I don't need the two of you talking about me like I'm not even here. I can handle my own life." His voice dropped to a whisper. "I'm just tired, that's all."

He pushed his plate aside, untouched, and climbed stiffly down from the barstool. Maybe after he had a nap he would be able to find the energy to eat. A warm shower would probably ease his aches and pains. Well, most of them.

". . . a lovely day. Temperatures in the low. . ." Gary hit the alarm clock and peered at the digital readout. 6:30 a.m. The tell-tell slap and meow followed.

Rolling over, he looked down the bed and his fully clothed body. He even still wore his shoes. What had started out as a nap had turned into an all-nighter. Well, it wasn't like he hadn't needed the rest. Pushing himself into a sitting position, he made his way toward the door.

Cat was there as usual to give him a haughty look before prancing on into his apartment. He bent gingerly down to pick up the paper. All the muscles he hadn't tended to yesterday after being hit by the car were voicing their displeasure. He hoped that the paper would allow him time for a nice, long hot shower.

He opened to the first page which announced the winners of the Good Samaritan Chicago contest. He flipped past the article in search of things that he could change. A large picture at the top of page 2 caused him to come to a dead stop.

It was himself, still dressed in his pajamas with a deer-in-the-headlights look in his eyes. The caption named him as the second place winner of the Good Samaritan Chicago contest. The short article beneath told of the letters that had been received concerning him. The one that had been printed was written by two women who had seen him save a co-worker from a fire, and a friend in a desperate situation.

Agnes Holmes and Ida Barbeau would be receiving prizes for their entries. Gary Hobson would be receiving a two week all-expenses-paid trip for two to any Sullivan Inns Resort in the U.S. or its territories.

This had to be a joke.

He ran downstairs to see if Chuck and Marissa were in. They weren't. The restaurant was empty. He ran to the phone and dialed Chuck's number. His groggy friend did not appreciate the call. Neither did he

appreciate Gary starting in on him about playing practical jokes.

By the time Gary had hung up the phone, though, with a by then very excited co-restaurant owner, Chuck was wanting to know if Tahiti was an U.S. territory. Gary began to realize that perhaps the article was no joke. Besides, he was sure he would have remembered Chuck and Marissa taking his picture in his pjs.

He might not be able to change the fact that he would won a trip, but he would be able to prevent himself being photographed in his pajamas for all the world to see.

Gary went about his day as usual, stopping disasters and returning home late in the evening. Chuck and Marissa were waiting for him.

"You missed the people who came to take your picture." Marissa told him as soon as he entered the room. "But you still won. So, where are you going to go?"

Gary did a double-take, before grabbing a beer out of the small refrigerator and taking a drink. "Who say's I'm going anywhere. I already told you that I don't get vacations from the paper, Marissa."

"Looks to me like the paper is giving you one," she returned smugly, undeterred. "Is there a Sullivan Inns Resort in Virginia?" she asked.

"I don't know, I didn't check," Gary returned. Why couldn't Marissa just give up on this? He would get over Sarah in his own way. Going to Virginia to beg her to take him back was not a part of the plan.

"There's one in Tahiti!" Chuck interjected.

Marissa shot Chuck an expression, then pointedly ignored his statement. "I did and there is," she told him. "The paper is telling you to go see Sarah, Gary. Do it. Live your life."

"In Tahiti!" Chuck cut in. "We--meaning my buddy and I--are going to Tahiti. That's what the paper is doing. It's telling him that he needs to go to a beach paradise to see scantily clad babes so he will forget all about his problems."

Gary made a gesture toward Chuck. "Chuck wants to go to Tahiti. Better yet, why don't the both of you go to Tahiti. You've worked hard. You deserve it."

Chuck's eyes lit up. "Gare, really?!" He grabbed his friend in a quick hug. "Marissa, this could be great! We could go to the. . ."

Marissa broke in on Chuck's plans, hands on her hips. "You're not even going to try to get her back are you? I know you care about her."

"What's the point, Marissa?" Gary was exasperated. She would not leave this alone. "It's not going to work. It can't work."

"You could tell her about the paper." Marissa said.

"No." Gary refused flatly. She would never believe him. Besides, she hated the news and said that she would never read it.

"Yes, you can, Gary." Marissa insisted. "She'll understand. She's started an organization to help people with her insurance money. You help people everyday with tomorrow's news. She'll understand."

"No." Gary shook his head, he couldn't listen. He couldn't dare hope. The last few weeks had been hard enough. "No. It can't work."

"I think you're just being a coward, Gary Hobson. And that's something that I never thought I would put in the same sentence with your name." With that she made her way out of the room, leaving a for once silent Chuck and a very disturbed Gary.

That night as Gary dressed for bed, Marissa's words played over and over in his brain. He wasn't a coward, was he? He could call Sarah and talk to her if he wanted to, couldn't he? He could. . . But what was the point? She had said in plain and simple terms that she had made a mistake and that there could be nothing between them. He still had the answering machine tape to prove it.

He lay in bed for long hours before he fell asleep.

"â€|rning Chicagoâ€|"

Gary slapped off the alarm and rolled over with a groan. The thing had been going on for some time from the sounds of it. He turned eyes gritty from too little sleep toward the display. 8:02! He was getting really bad with this. The stupid radio should have shut off long ago. The double slap of the newspaper startled him even further.

He threw back the covers and climbed out of bed and made his way unsteadily toward the door. Cat sat there as usual, but the feline's look seemed to linger as if he were trying to get something across. Gary frowned at that, then moved the creature out of the way and did an immediate double take.

Two newspapers sat beneath the animal.

The Virginian-Pilot & Ledger Star lay beneath the Chicago Sun-Times. Gary held one in each hand, stunned out of his mind. A sound on the stairway caught his attention. He looked up just in time to see a camera crew, headed by a woman carrying a microphone.

Someone snapped his picture. In his peripheral vision, he caught the image of himself holding two newspapers. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he remembered something about a deer in the headlights.

"What's the deal, partner?" Chuck stumbled into the office. "I'm already packed."

Gary looked up from the newspaper. "I'm going to Virginia." He told his buddy. "Th-the Virginia paper and the Sun-Times came today. I have to save someone in Virginia."

"What?" Chuck was crestfallen. "Can't you just call it in?"

"Chuck. Someone is going to be seriously injured if I don't go to Virginia. Today. The man's name wasn't listed. I'm going to have to go. The travel people are making all the arrangements. I'm leaving in a few minutes."

"What about your own city? Don't they need help?"

"All ready done. Sorry buddy. Gotta go."

"Aren't you going to call Sarah?" Marissa asked him as he gathered up his overnight bag.

He didn't have time to argue with Marissa about something that he hadn't yet come to terms with himself. "No time," he said and walked through the doorway into the bar. The last sounds before the door closed behind him were of Chuck lamenting that the pretty ladies would be so disappointed. Marissa attempted to soothe him in the most sarcastic manner possible.

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Part 9

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Gary looked around the darkened streets of Virginia Beach, Virginia as the limo driver continued along Newtown Rd. A five hour lay-over in Atlanta had put him into Norfolk International with a mere hour and a half to spare before an unknown man would be paralyzed by a fall from a ladder in a local hardware store. The twenty minutes he had spent trying to avoid the Sullivan Resorts greeting party had cut that time in half.

They had finally agreed that he could make a stop before being driven to the Resort Inn for a few publicity photos and to sign in. The paper had reported that the accident would take place at 8:37 p.m. There were only two minutes left.

"Hey, can't you go any faster?" Gary demanded as he tried to disentangle himself from one of the Sullivan spokewomen. The other spokesperson had long since given up on Gary and his co-worker and had gone up to the front of the vehicle. He tossed a plastic smile toward Gary and said that the hardware store was one more traffic light further along the road.

When he returned forward he murmured something to the driver under his breath, but Gary ignored it. True to the man's word, however, the vehicle turned into a strip shopping center after passing through the next intersection. Gary was on the edge of his seat, and jumped out of the door as soon as the vehicle pulled to a stop in front of the building.

He ran through the front doors and took the place in. The ceiling towered high overhead, containing numerous displays of bathroom fixtures and decorated kitchen and bedroom scenarios. He had always wondered how they had gotten that furniture up there at an angle. The man tottering half-way up a ladder several rows away answered that

question for him.

"Hey!" Gary yelled, seeing that the man was already on the verge of falling. Right before his eyes, the man's arms began to pinwheel. Gary put on a burst of speed, hoping, praying that he would make it there in time.

The man's foot slipped off the ladder and he began to fall. Right into Gary's outstretched arms. His weight drove them both to the unfinished warehouse floor in an ungainly heap. If the breath weren't knocked out of him, Gary might have yelled out in pain.

The man climbed up off of him, obviously unharmed. He looked down at Gary and then back up at the ladder. "Wow, man. You saved my life. I would have been a goner for sure." He reached a hand down to help Gary to his feet.

Gary nodded at him, anxious to limp away as a crowd was beginning to form. "W-well, you're welcome," he told the man. Then more forcefully, "Be more careful. Always have a partner when you're climbing a ladder!"

The man nodded. "Thanks a lot, Mr. . . ."

"Hobson," Gary filled in the blank as a sought an exit. "Gary Hobson."

"Gary Hobson," the man's brow furrowed in confusion. "Gary Hobson. . ." Then, shaking his head, he reached a hand toward Gary. "Thank you very much, Gary Hobson. The name's Thomas. Thomas Reynolds. But, I can see you need to go," he noted Gary's nervousness. "But I'd like to repay you. Maybe buy you a beer. How can I reach you?"

"I-I'm not sure," Gary told him. "I'm just here on vacation."

"Oh," the man nodded, seeming disappointed. "Well, here's my card. Give me a call and maybe we can set something up."

"Right." Gary took the card, and nodded again. "Right, I'll do that." He made a beeline for the exit. When he reached the car, the chauffeur was there to open the door for him. He tried to ignore the astonished faces of the hardware store's patrons on the opposite side of the glass.

By the time Gary was done with the Resort people, including one very touchy-feely spokesperson, and called Chuck and Marissa to tell them that he had arrived safely, it was near midnight. For someone who had just won a trip, and was supposedly the guest of honor, he was being bossed around a lot. There was a litany of dinners that he was expected to attend before he could enjoy his 'free' vacation. All he wanted to do when the spokespeople finally left was to fall into the wonderfully large bed in the VIP suite and sleep for a thousand years. He didn't even care if the cat didn't show up the next morning.

But, bright and early, at 7:30 a.m. it did. Gary walked obediently to the door, picked up the paper and the cat and called room service for some milk. The Virginian-Pilot & Ledger-Star was waiting for him. It promised to be a busy morning, especially since he wasn't entirely sure where things were. Things would relax a bit in the afternoon and

then pick up later in the evening. He had until then to decide what to do about Sarah. Perhaps Marissa was right and there really was something to the paper sending him to Virginia Beach.

Freshly showered and dressed, he was ready to head out to his first saves. A house fire and another choking. What was it with Egg McMuffins? Someone knocked at the door just as he was about to open it. It was touchy-feely lady from the night before.

"Good morning, Mr. Hobson. I was just checking to be sure that everything was to your satisfaction," the woman stated, stepping into the suite, moving to shut the door.

Gary laughed nervously. "E-everything is fine, Msâ€|" He moved carefully past her and reopened the door.

"Call me Karen."

"K-karen," Gary nodded. "I was just on my way. . . "

"Right," Karen drawled. "If you need anything, you just call me. You hear?"

Gary nodded, backing out of the door, stumbling into someone. He turned to apologize--anything to get away from Karen.

"Gary?" A startled voice spoke.

"Sarah!" Gary gaped at the woman standing before him. She looked more beautiful than he remembered. For just a moment, everything that had passed didn't matter and all that he wanted to do was to take her into his arms. They took two steps toward one another. But then Sarah looked beyond him at Karen What's-her-name who was lounging on the door jamb. Sarah's eyes hardened.

"I. . . uh. . ." Gary stuttered.

"I'll just be going," Karen said, and sauntered off down the hall.

"I should, too," Sarah turned to leave.

"No, Sarah. Please wait." Gary pleaded with her to stay.

"Why?" Sarah turned back and demanded.

"Because that wasn't what it probably looked like. You see, she. . . uh. . . she. . ."

"Only wanted your body?" Sarah put in.

"Yes. No." Gary shook his head. "I don't know. She's just touchy-feely, is all. I don't even know her last name."

"That's not a plus, Gary," Sarah told him. "Although, it really shouldn't matter. After all, I did have to find out from my brother that you were in town. You know when he told me that he'd met someone with your name, who sounded and looked like you and who had arrived in a limousine from Sullivan Inns and had saved his life, why it just seemed the most logical thing that it would be the same Gary

Hobson that I knew who had come here to surprise me with some wild romantic get-a-way.

"That is why you came, isn't it Gary?" He couldn't mistake the sarcasm, the pain or the hope in her voice.

"Sarah, I . . . I gotta. . ." he glanced at his watch. He had to save an elderly woman from setting her house on fire, and a business man from choking on breakfast at a stop light.

Sarah let out a strangled sound and turned away. "I really cared," she said in a choked voice. "I really cared about you, Gary. So much that I kept hanging around even after you've made it perfectly clear that you just don't have room for me in your life."

"Sarah," he moved toward her, to put his arms around her to offer even a small amount of comfort. To promise her that he had to go but that he would be back.

Sarah shrugged his hands off of her shoulders. "No, don't do that! Can't you see that I'm trying to get over you? Just stay away from me. Leave me alone and. . . just. . . just live your life."

Gary stood frozen as she rushed past him, her words echoing through his mind as he flashed on a slip of paper that Snow had left behind. Sarah's voice melded with that of Marissa. They both called him a coward. But he wasn't a coward, and he would prove it.

Gary completed all of the morning tasks that he had set out for himself. He then began an intensive search to find Sarah. He knew that she had rented a townhouse in Virginia Beach. But she didn't answer the phone, or come to the door. He tried the hardware store again, realizing that Thomas Reynolds must have been Sarah's brother, but Thomas was a contractor and didn't work directly for the store. He had thrown the business card away the night before.

Gary had almost run out of options when he remembered the bed and breakfast run by Sarah's mother. Which city had the postcard listed? Indian Trail, Indian Stream, Indian Forest? Gary got a rental car, several maps and haggled with an Iranian store owner for directions to the small town of Indian River.

Mirabel's Bed & Breakfast was a lovely old house in a semi rural setting. The door was opened by a slender woman who appeared to be in her mid-forties. A thick streak of gray ran through reddish-brown hair that grew away from her forehead. She and Sarah had the same eyes.

"You must be Gary Hobson," the woman spoke before Gary could even gather his thoughts. "Estelle Reynolds. I heard from a little birdie that you were here. Come on in."

Gary obediently followed the woman into the house.

"I hear you're staying with the competition?" Estelle stated, spinning on him suddenly. Her friendly smile though, softened the blow. "I want you to know that I won't hear of it."

"Ah--uh, I actually won a contest," Gary explained. "I sorta have to."

"Okay. That's different," Estelle assured him wide grin. "I'm very pleased to finally meet you, Gary. Sarah has told me a lot about you. Including the fact that you broke up."

"Uh. . . yeah," Gary remembered few times when he'd felt more uncomfortable. "You see, I. . ."

"Oh, don't worry," Estelle waved his explanation away. "She told me she dumped you. She told me why."

Gary flinched.

"Sorry," she smiled apologetically. "That the truth hurts is a good thing. But if you feel that way, why didn't you call her back, try to change her mind?"

"I. . . didn't think that she would want me. . . back." Gary managed, confusion working its way across his brow. Was he missing something here. Hadn't she said. . . ?

Estelle shrugged and nodded. "Okay. I'll accept that. But you're here now. So, what's next?"

"W-what's next?" Gary's head was spinning. This conversation was moving far too fast.

"Yes," Estelle said as if talking to someone who wasn't in command of all of his faculties. "You. Sarah. What's next?"

"Well, I'd say that is kind of up to Sarah." Gary tried.

"Oh, come now," Estelle eyed him. "Surely you're not going to put the whole thing on her are you? What do you want to happen?"

Gary's heart began beating more quickly. Estelle definitely had a way of getting to the point of things. "I want to get back together with your daughter." He told her. "I want to make up."

Estelle smiled and touched his cheek. "I think I like you, Gary Hobson. And I'm a very good judge of character. Couldn't run a bed and breakfast without that knack. Something is holding you back, though, isn't it?"

Was this woman reading his mind? "H-holding me b-back?"

Estelle laughed out loud. "That's what I said, yes. Sarah is a very understanding girl, except when she's mad. Then she just sees red and refuses to listen. She's like me that way. We both eventually come to our senses. We both also like flowers. Go on back through that doorway and follow the hallway. She's in the garden out back."

"Thank you," Gary moved hesitantly past her, feeling like he had been hit by a whirlwind.

"Oh and Gary," Estelle stopped him.

"Yes?" he turned back in her direction.

"Thank you for saving my daughter, and sending her back to me in one piece. Thank you for watching over her when we couldn't."

Gary nodded and continued on through the doorway.

Gary walked through the hallway and out of a side door that led to a rose garden. Several benches were placed strategically throughout the garden. Sarah sat on one furthest from the door. She was facing away from him. Gary slipped quietly out of the door and down the steps. When he reached the bottom, he settled in the seat beside Sarah.

She glanced up at him, but didn't speak. Her expression remained closed.

Gary pulled out his paper and placed it on his lap. "Sarah," he began. "My life is pretty complicated right now. But, I've come to realize that even people with complicated lives can have special feelings about other people. I have special feelings for you."

Sarah continued to stare straight ahead. "Is that why you didn't tell me you were in town?" she asked. "Because of these special feelings?"

Gary nodded. He deserved that one, and Sarah deserved the truth. "Yes and No," he said. "I was still trying to decide what to do about those feelings. But there was really only one choice, and it's something that I should have done a long time ago."

"I'm listening," Sarah said. Still she didn't look at him.

Gary unfolded the newspaper and placed it on her lap. "Do you remember back in Springfield, I asked you if you could look in the newspaper and chose just one thing and change it, would you?"

"Yeah, I remember," Sarah sighed. "But what does that have to do--"

"No, no, hear me out," Gary insisted. "Look at the date on the paper."

Sarah frowned exasperatedly, but looked at the paper any way. "So it has tomorrow's date on it. It's a trick paper."

"But what if it's not," Gary challenged. "What if you could just open it up, find the bad stuff and change it. Would you do it?"

Sarah looked at him in disbelief. She shook her head and gave the paper back to him. "No. I wouldn't have that kind of arrogance to think that I could do that. What's done is done. All anyone can do is to pick up the pieces."

Gary closed his eyes. "It's not a trick paper," he insisted, desperate for her not to mean what she had said. "\_I\_ get tomorrow's news, today. I can change things. It's who I am and what I do. And if you think that's. . . arrogant, well, then, you're not the person I thought you were."

"And if you expect me to believe this ridiculous excuse for the way you've been behaving then you're not the man I thought you were. Besides, the paper has always been your thing, Gary. I've already told you that I don't want any part of it."

"Yeah. Yeah, you did." Gary was cold on the inside. "Umâ€œ!" he cleared his throat and stood, unable to look at the woman sitting before him. "Uh. I've gotta go. Good-bye."

Gary managed to make it to his final save of the day with a few minutes to spare. The teenager who had hazarded the treacherous rocks between the shore and the miniature lighthouse in the bay was saved from a watery grave. Gary convinced him that it might be better to carve his girlfriend's name during the day light hours. The kid ran off and disappeared, leaving Gary alone in the failing dusk.

Having treaded half the distance to the lighthouse just to stop the kid, Gary had to make his way the rest of the way back. But the tide was on its way out and some of the rocks were slippery. It only took one misstep and Gary was falling. Lights exploded in his head as he cracked it against the dark rock.

Sarah had had a horrible night. But having always been an early riser, she climbed out of bed in the early hours and headed downstairs for coffee. The slight thump at her front door brought her up short.

"Who is it?" she called, looking through the peephole. She couldn't see anyone. But then a soft mewing sound reached her ears. An instinctive shiver ran its way up her spine and she jerked the door open. The sight of the orange tabby and the newspaper changed her fear to anger.

She stepped out onto the front porch and looked in both directions. No one. Not even a car was about. "Gary Hobson," she called. "I know you're out here, and I'm not falling for it." She picked up the cat and left the paper on the porch. Surely he didn't think she was so gullible. And if he were low enough to bring the poor animal into it, well then, he just didn't deserve the creature.

She placed the cat on the floor while she placed some milk in a small saucer. "There, there," she stroked the animal's head. He drank contentedly as she turned to her coffee maker. A slapping sound behind her caused her to turn sharply.

There on the counter was the newspaper, and the cat was sitting atop it staring at her in the strangest way.

"What?" Sarah crept toward the living room, giving the animal a wide berth. She didn't like this. Not at all. Who was in her home?

"Mrwww," the cat started up a fuss, scratching his paws at the paper until the entire thing fell to the floor. Sarah would have continued moving had it not opened to a page containing a very familiar face. No longer heading the cat, she made a bee-line for the paper and sank to the floor to read the caption.

Sarah's heart stopped. Tears sprang from her eyes as she read the article which told of how Gary's body had been found the previous morning. It stated that he had evidently been the victim of. . . Sarah paused. Yesterday morning? How could his body have been found yesterday morning when. . .

She quickly flipped back to the front page in search of the date. Tomorrow's date? Another trick paper? She ran her fingers over Gary's picture and looked into those earnest eyes and made her decision. "He was telling the truth, wasn't he kitty?" she asked the cat. The animal looked away from her and went back to his milk.

Sarah went back to the article. It said that he had probably fallen against the rocks the night before. . . She didn't need to read any further. She ran upstairs and threw on some clothes before dashing out to her car. Gary needed her help. There wasn't a moment to waste.

She found him collapsed against the rocks, unconscious and wet. It was a miracle that his head had stayed above the water during the night. As far as Sarah was concerned, it was a day for miracles. She stood by as the paramedics carefully removed him from the rocks and wrapped him in a warm blanket. He seemed in and out of a semi-conscious state, but was never really aware of his surroundings. Sarah stayed with him every step of the way.

When he awoke, hours later, in Norfolk General, Sarah was right there beside him, holding his hand. He didn't speak, simply looked at her as if he wasn't sure that she was really there.

"Hi," Sarah broke the silence and smiled at him.

"Hi," he returned softly. "What happened?"

Sarah smiled sadly. "Well, that's a funny story," she said. "I got a newspaper and looked inside it and I found a story about a wonderful, caring man; a compassionate man and I wanted to change things. You see, he gave me the power to change. Not just in my life, but other things too. But I was stupid and I turned down his gift. And when I came to my senses, I went back and I picked up all the pieces and hoped that they would be enough for him to forgive me and accept me back into his life."

Gary stared up into her eyes, and his began to fill. "The paper came to you?" he asked, daring to hope.

Sarah nodded, laughing through her own tears. "And a cat."

Gary laughed too and then reached for her. Sarah went willingly into his arms. "I've missed you so much," he whispered.

"Me, too," Sarah said. "Oh, Gary. Me too."

voice-over: Sometimes the path that leads to what we need is a difficult one full of twists and turns and shadows and crossroads. We may feel as if we've lost our way in the darkness. It is then that we must stop, look around and remember all the bits and pieces that have made the journey worthwhile. It is those bits and pieces, those lives and memories that we've touched and have touched us, that give us the power to change, the power to go on.

The End.

End  
file.